

Bush signs C'mas gift to war veterans

WASHINGTON — Nearly 40 years after he started lobbying Congress for better benefits for Filipino World War II veterans, Guillermo Rumingan was in the Oval Office as President George W. Bush signed legislation Tuesday that will provide full disability benefits to some of the veterans.

Twelve World War II Filipino veterans were issued their VA Universal ID card Thursday morning at the New York City VA hospital. With the ID card, they will be able to receive health care treatment as veterans of the U.S. Armed Forces. The next and final step is to win pension benefits for all veterans, including those that reside in the Philippines.

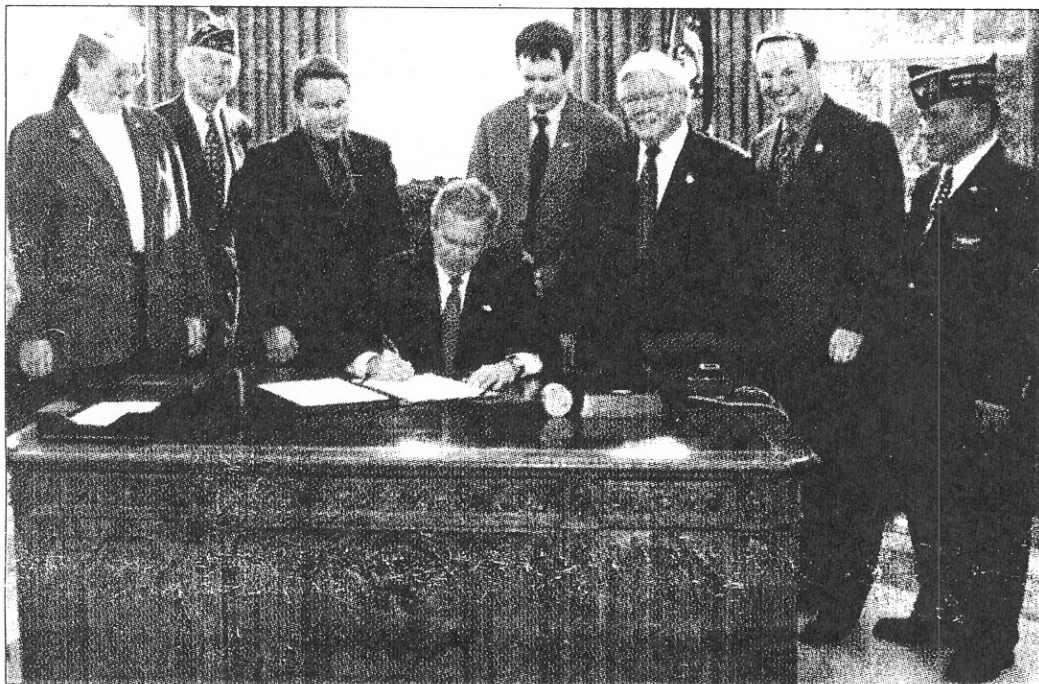
"It's a nice feeling because, after 57 years, we can now receive equal compensation. It's a good Christmas gift, as well as a good birthday present from Uncle Sam," said Rumingan, who turns 78 next week.

The bill signing completed a package deal that also includes broader health care benefits for former members of the New Philippines Scouts and the Commonwealth Army of the Philippines.

Rumingan fought against the Japanese as a guerrilla and later enlisted in the New Philippine Scouts, a unit that served with U.S. troops.

The Philippines were a U.S. territory at the time. He immigrated to the United States in 1963.

But under longstanding U.S. law, the Arlington, Virginia, resident, who has a lung condition,



DONE DEAL: President George W. Bush signs H. R. 2297, the Veterans Benefits Act of 2003, in the Oval Office. The act expands the benefits program for veterans and their surviving spouses. Witnessing the signing are (from left): veteran Carol Near of East Moline, Illinois; Representatives Rob Simmons (R-Conn.), Chris Smith (R-N.J.), Lane Evans (D-Ill.), Henry Brown (R-S.C.), Bob Filner (D-Calif.), and Filipino-American veteran Guillermo Rumingan of Arlington, Virginia, service officer of the American Coalition for Filipino Veterans, Inc. (MNSwirephoto)

and others like him were entitled to only half the disability benefits granted to U.S. veterans.

Congress rolled back many benefits for Filipino veterans after the Philippines became independent in 1946.

The legislation Mr. Bush signed now makes former New Philippine Scouts living in the United States eligible for full disability benefits.

Widows of the scouts will receive survivor benefits. They will be eligible for burial benefits as well.

The legislation was a companion to a bill that granted health care benefits, including access to veterans hospitals, to former

members of the Commonwealth Army and the New Philippine Scouts who live in the United States.

Mr. Bush signed that bill Dec. 6.

About 8,000 veterans will be covered by the legislation, which is estimated to cost \$19 million a year, according to the American Coalition for Filipino Veterans.

California is home to many of the veterans, with large populations in the San Diego and Carson areas.

The package falls short of the broader benefits, including pensions, that the veterans and their supporters have long sought.

Some have criticized it as a half-measure and say it will make little difference to veterans who are getting benefits under Medicare, the federal health insurance program for the elderly.

Rumingan said the legislation was part of a "step-by-step" process and vowed to continue lobbying "until full equity will be achieved."

His sentiments were echoed by Rep. Bob Filner (D-San Diego), who also attended the bill-signing ceremony.